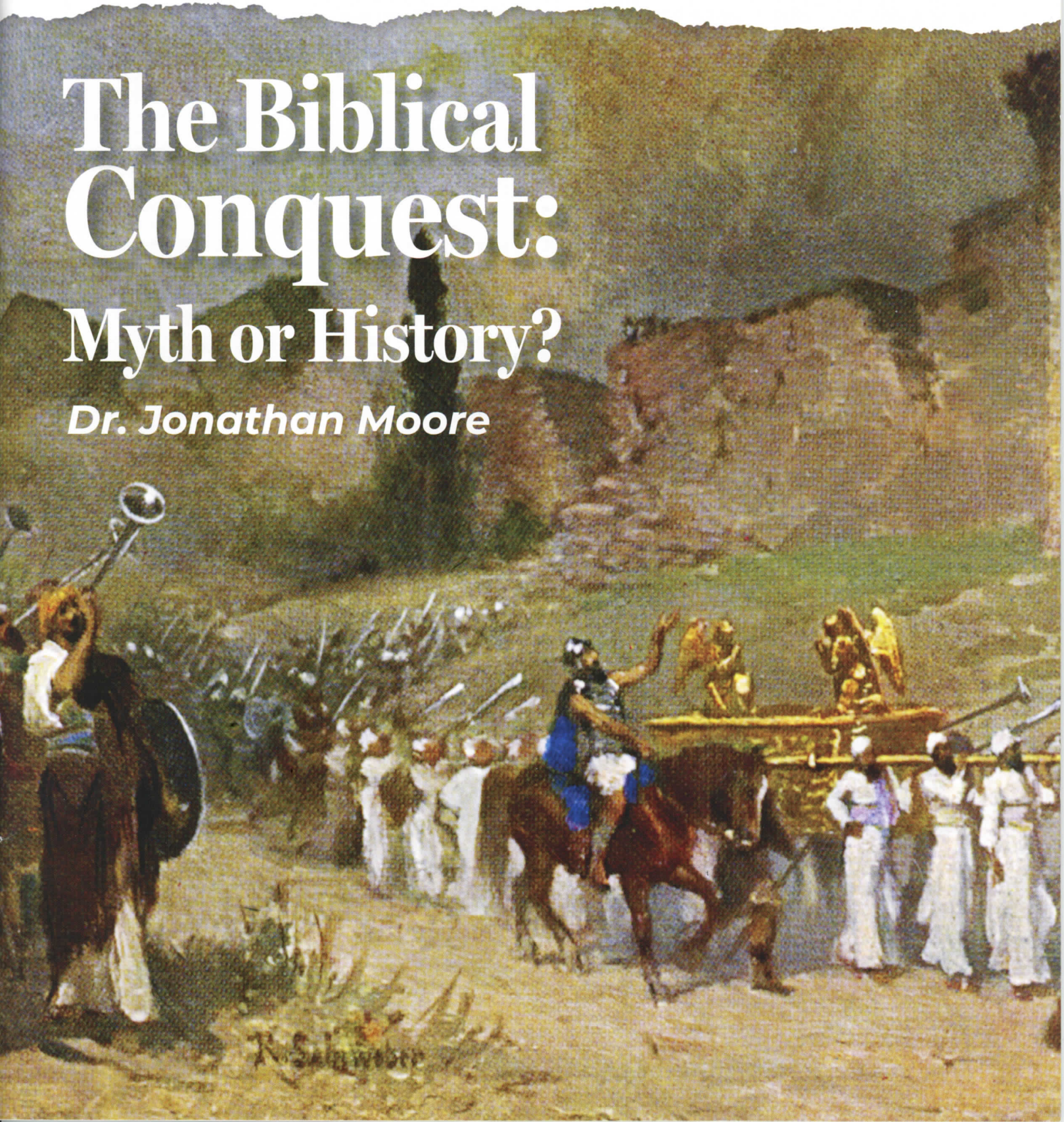


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The Biblical Conquest: Myth or History?

Dr. Jonathan Moore



INTRODUCTION

We live in an amazing time in history when almost every month another discovery is unearthed that in some way validates the details of the biblical text. Yet, despite the mounting evidence for the Bible's authenticity, skepticism and challenges to the historicity of the biblical text remain prevalent in the halls of academia. Our universities and mainstream media have largely embraced a minimalistic philosophy that continues to designate the biblical text as an agenda-driven treatise that cannot be trusted objectively since—they allege—biased authors wrote it long after the events it describes. Even some in Christendom have waved the white flag of surrender and gone as far as to declare that archaeology has proven that the Exodus and Conquest did not happen as the Bible describes.

According to our postmodern culture, truth is relative and unobtainable unless it is delivered by people of “science” as opposed to those who can only posit arguments of “faith.” What many fail to understand is that every unearthed piece of pottery or bone requires an interpretation that is inevitably filtered through one’s presuppositions. In many cases, it can take several years for the often-differing interpretations to be parsed and weighed to determine which is better supported by the evidence.

It is my objective to always remember the scriptural mandate found in 1 Peter 3:15: “...always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.” And I would contend, as one who has studied archaeological and apologetic matters carefully while completing my PhD and working in the field for several years, that it truly takes more faith to reject the biblical account of the Conquest than it does to accept the historicity of the events recorded in Joshua and Judges.

I have targeted the five specific sites of Jericho, Ai (Khirbet el-Maqatir), Mount Ebal, Hazor, and Shiloh to best demonstrate substantial archaeological evidence for the biblical account of the Conquest during the Late Bronze Age, ca. 1400 BC.

Jericho

When the Israelites arrived at Jericho ca. 1406 BC, the MB IIC/III fortification system was already several hundred years old, but despite this and Jericho's modest population (estimated to be no more than 4,000 people), the city presented a major obstacle between the Israelites and their inheritance.¹



Tell es-Sultan, ancient Jericho, scarred with trenches from digs spanning the last 150 years.

Credit: Associates for Biblical Research

Over the last 150 years, archaeological excavations at Jericho (modern Tell es-Sultan) have overwhelmingly challenged the historicity of the biblical accounts about Joshua and the entire Israelite Conquest. In the 1930s, John Garstang dated the destruction of Jericho to the end of LB IB (ca. 1400 BC),² which is in harmony with the biblical date. However, in the 1950s, Kathleen Kenyon dated Jericho's destruction to the end of MB IIB/III (ca. 1550 BC),³ which conflicts with the biblical date. The overall scholarly consensus chose Kenyon's dates over those of Garstang and continues to support her views. As one analyzes the data to fairly substantiate the historicity of the biblical account of Jericho and the biblical date for the fall of the city, the evidence must be untethered from dogma if one is to determine the truth.

Ceramics

When Garstang excavated Jericho, he hypothesized a 15th-century-BC destruction at an area of the site that is called "City IV," in part because of the pottery found in the destruction debris, scarabs recovered from nearby tombs, the absence of Mycenaean ware,⁴ and the lack of reference to the city of Jericho in the Amarna Letters (1399-1300 BC).⁵ Based on her own ceramic analysis and a lack of imported Cypriot bichrome ware (a type of pottery that is characteristic of LB I sites), Kenyon ignored the evidence for the LB I dating and claimed that Jericho suffered a cataclysmic destruction ca.

John Garstang at the Jericho excavation site, studying a Middle Bronze Age jug. Credit: Palestine Exploration Fund



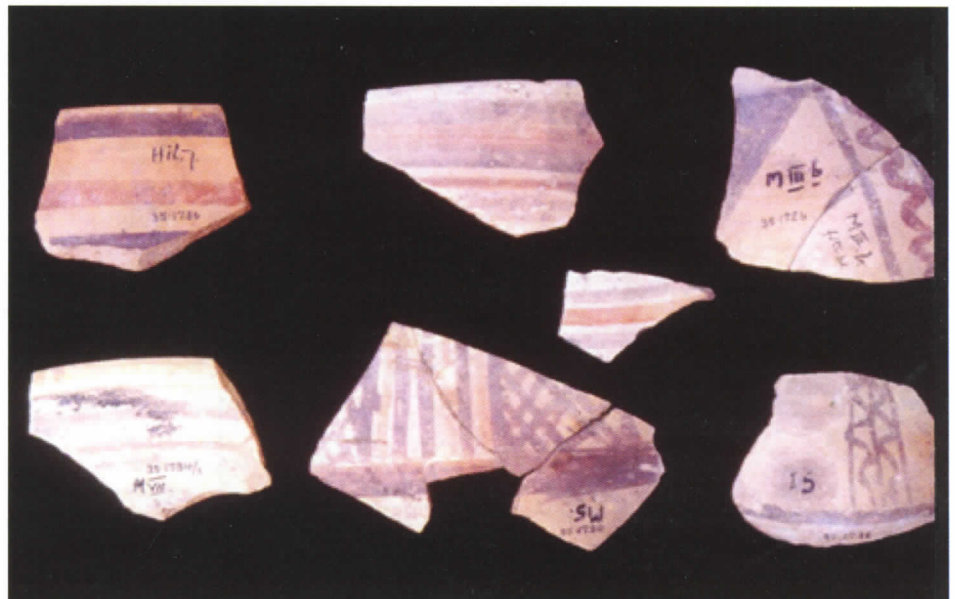


1560 BC and was not reoccupied until a very brief occupation in the 14th century BC.⁶ However, Bryant Wood's reanalysis of the ceramic data from Jericho demonstrated that there are many parallels (many of which were, inexplicably, found by Kenyon's own team⁷) between pottery from Jericho and pottery known to date to the Late Bronze Age from other late-15th-century LBI sites.⁸ Wood furthermore noted numerous misinterpretations made by Kenyon and

*Kathleen Kenyon exploring the Jericho dig site.
Credit: Palestine Exploration Fund*

thus opened the door for interpretations that are better supported by the facts.⁹ Jericho's most recent excavator, Lorenzo Nigro, also acknowledges that Jericho was occupied in the Late Bronze Age.¹⁰

Cypriot bichrome ware is a type of pottery originating from Cypress, characterized by its black and red color patterns. Due to the lack of authentic Cypriot bichrome ware at the site, Kenyon concluded that the date of Jericho's destruction should be moved back to 1560 BC. Kenyon failed to take into account that there were examples of imitation, locally made bichrome pottery found at the site, implying that the original dating given by Garstang, and affirmed by Bryant Wood, is the correct interpretation of the ceramic data. Credit: Associates for Biblical Research



Scarabs

In 1941, Garstang recovered a continuous series of Egyptian scarabs extending from the 13th Dynasty to the 18th Dynasty (18th century to early 14th century BC). The tombs northwest of Jericho yielded important scarabs pertaining to the pharaonic reigns of Hatshepsut (ca. 1504–1483 BC), Thutmose III (ca. 1504–1450 BC), and Amenhotep III (ca. 1412–1370 BC). Two royal signet rings bearing the insignia of Amenhotep III also confirm that the cemetery was in active use up to the end of the LB I period.¹¹ Based on this evidence, the fall of the city could not have occurred before the reign of Amenhotep III (ca. 1412–1370 BC).¹²

Wall Collapse

According to Joshua 6:20, after the walls of Jericho fell, the Israelites “went up into the city, every man straight before him.” Thus, the biblical account intimates that the outer wall collapsed down the slope of the hill on which the city was built, creating a ramp by which the Israelites entered the city. When Kenyon analyzed the fall of the substantial fortification walls (what she described as “the main collapse”), she found a wall of red mud bricks that likely had sat

SCARABS FOUND AT JERICHO

These scarabs discovered at Jericho provide important markers for the historical chronology of ancient Jericho.



HATSHEPSUT

(ca. 1504–1483 BC)

Hatshepsut, one of only a few female pharaohs, was the fifth pharaoh of the 13th dynasty of Egypt. Scholars debate the exact year her rule began, but it is known to start in either 1478 or 1479 BC, and last until her death in 1483 BC.



THUTMOSE III

(ca. 1504–1450 BC)

Thutmose III was only two years old when he inherited the throne, ruling as coregent with Hatshepsut for the first 22 years of his reign. Upon her death, he regained the status of Egypt's only pharaoh and reigned an additional 32 years. Thutmose III is regarded as one of Egypt's great warrior kings.



AMENHOTEP III

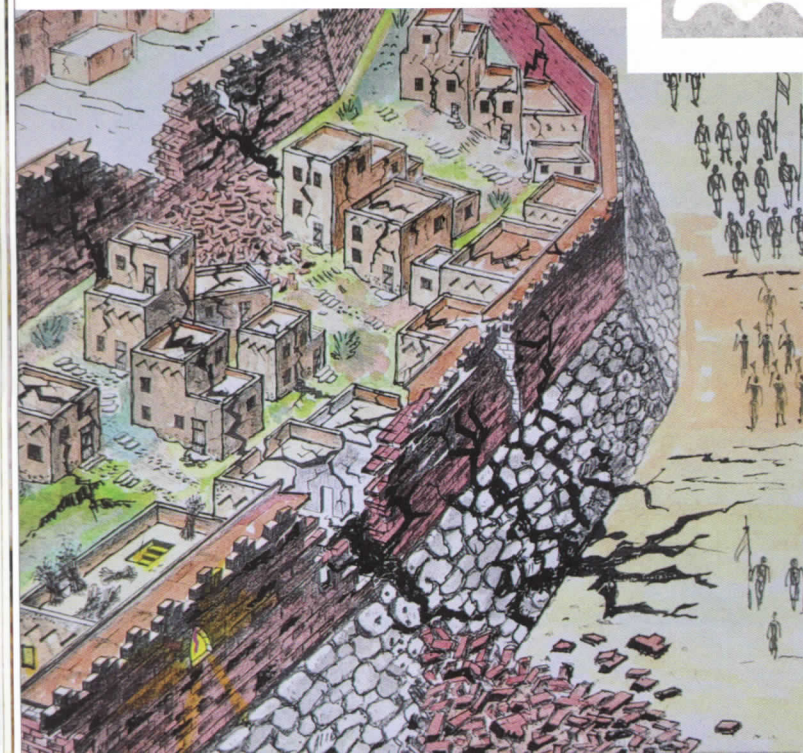
(ca. 1412–1370 BC)

Amenhotep III ruled Egypt from 1386–1349 BC. The period of Amenhotep's rule is known to fall during the height of Egypt's prosperity, international dominance, and artistic production.

Credit: Ashley Talamantez

upon the top of the revetment wall until the final destruction of City IV.¹³ Nigro contends that the collapsed MB III defensive system was refurbished in the Late Bronze Age by adding a mud-brick wall on top of the surviving crest of the Cyclopean

ABR artist Gene Fackler created this artistic image depicting Jericho at the time of the Conquest of Joshua. Note the upper and lower city areas divided by the upper wall. Beneath is the lower mudbrick wall built atop the stone retaining, or revetment wall (also known as a glacis). There is clear evidence in the archaeological remains of the lower mudbrick wall having fallen to form a ramp into the city. Credit: Gene Fackler



Wall.¹⁴ These red mud bricks tumbled over the outer revetment wall that lies at the base of the tell.¹⁵

Conflagration

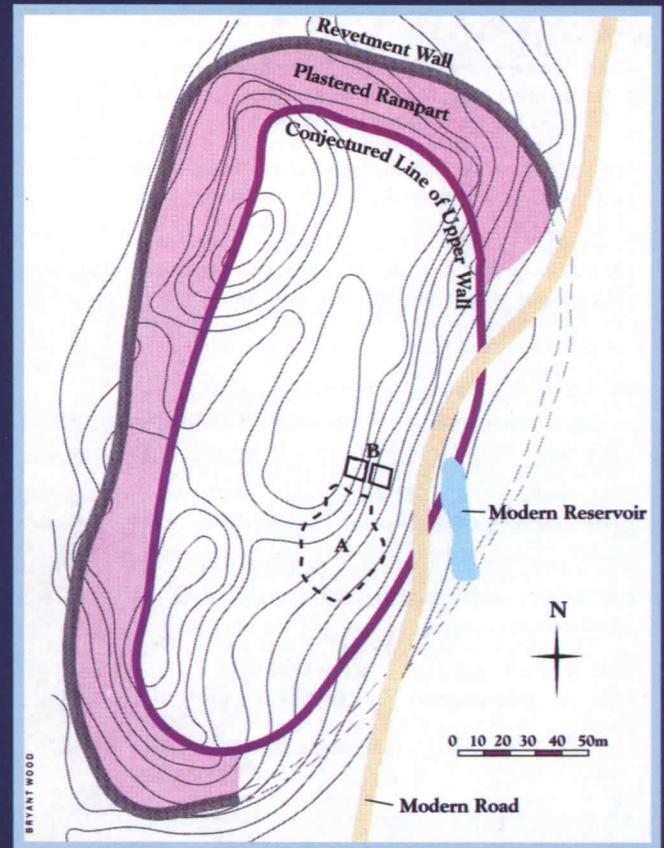
Joshua 6:24 indicates that the Israelites “burned the whole city and everything in it” (NIV). Kenyon affirmed that “the destruction was complete.”¹⁶ She described in detail a layer of burned ash and debris over three feet thick.

Unused Grain

The biblical record states that Jericho fell after only seven days (Jos 6:3-5, 6:15-16), and the Israelites were instructed not to take any item from the city for themselves, but only to take the gold and silver and the bronze and iron objects for the treasury of the house of the Lord (6:17-19, 6:24). Both Garstang¹⁷ and Kenyon¹⁸ found large quantities of burnt grain in the ground-floor rooms of the houses, including six bushels discovered in one season. The amount of grain stored after harvest provided food until the next harvest, making it an extremely valuable target for plundering armies, but in this instance, the conquerors had no interest in securing it.¹⁹ This unusual amount of grain indicates that there was no extended siege and no plundering of this valuable commodity, aligning with the biblical details of Jericho’s conquest being one week in duration and the contents of the city not being taken for spoil.



A total of six bushels of grain were discovered amidst the charred debris of City IV at Jericho, giving an important clue to the city’s demise. Its end could not have come as a result of a siege, because that would have exhausted the city’s food supply. Instead, the attack must have occurred suddenly, soon after the spring harvest – two crucial details that match the account in the Book of Joshua. Credit: Palestine Exploration Fund



City IV at Jericho—the city that all scholars agree was violently destroyed—was a fortified enclave. The city’s outer defenses consisted of a stone retaining (revetment) wall at the base of the tell that held in place a high, plastered rampart. Above the rampart, on top of the tell, was a mud-brick wall that served as Jericho’s city wall proper. The approximate line of this wall is indicated by the pink line. In the 1930s, British archaeologist John Garstang excavated a residential area, marked “A,” just west of the perennial spring that supplied the city’s water and that now fills the modern reservoir. A significant portion of the tell was destroyed to make way for a modern road. Signs of a fiery destruction and his dating of the remains led Garstang to conclude that the Israelites had indeed put the city to the torch about 1400 BC, in harmony with the biblical narrative. Kathleen Kenyon, Garstang’s successor at Jericho, excavated the area marked “B.” Her conclusions dated Jericho’s destruction to about 1550 BC, 150 years earlier than Garstang’s date. This destruction, she concluded, was far too early to ascribe to the Israelites. By the time the Israelites appeared on the scene, she argued, there was no walled city at Jericho.

Credit: Dr. Bryant G. Wood

Wall Houses

Ernst Sellin and Carl Watzinger found several domestic structures from the final phase of City IV on the north side of the tell where a short stretch of the lower city wall did not fall as everywhere else.²⁰ A portion of that mud-brick wall was still standing to a height of over two meters, thereby confirming the existence of houses in Jericho that correspond with the depiction of Rahab's house in Joshua 2:15.

Weighing the Evidence

Considering the ceramic typology, the scarab dating, and the many biblical parallels discussed above, the skepticism that exists among archaeologists and biblical historians regarding a Jericho City IV destruction ca. 1400 is unfounded. The congruence between the material finds and the biblical account should persuade scholars to at least remain open to the possibility that this destruction was caused by the people who claimed (with exquisite detail) to be the perpetrators.

Ai

Following the destruction of Jericho, Ai was the second place the Israelites attacked after entering Canaan (Jos 7:1–8:29). That places the destruction of Ai shortly after the spring of 1406 BC. However, while everyone agrees on Jericho's location, the location of Ai remains the most contested in Joshua's account of the Conquest.

For nearly a century, the location of Ai has been uncritically fixed at et-Tell. However, excavations at et-Tell have revealed that there was no occupation at the site in the Middle Bronze and Late Bronze periods, so it would have been unoccupied at the time Israel entered Canaan.²¹ Though most scholars still believe et-Tell is the correct location for Ai, et-Tell fails as a candidate for Joshua's Ai since it has no Late Bronze occupation, no militarily significant hill to the north, no shallow valley to the north (see Jos 8:11, 8:13), and no ambush site nearby that would provide cover from both Ai and Bethel (8:9, 8:12–13).²² On the other hand, based on its strategic location and the archaeological findings highlighted below, the site of Khirbet el-Maqatir better fits the biblical description of Ai.

Fortification

Bryant Wood and Scott Stripling identified a small MB III-LB I fortress (active ca. 1500–1400 BC) at Khirbet

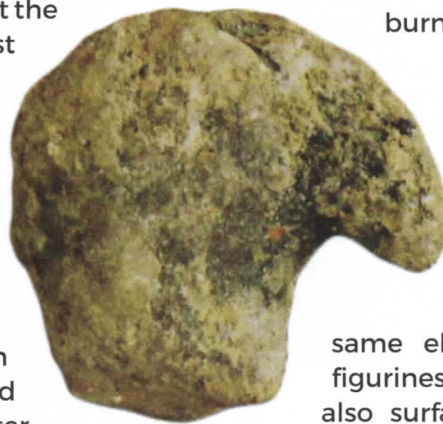


A digital reconstruction of Ai, based on the archaeological findings at Khirbet el-Maqatir. Credit: Tom Miller

el-Maqatir that occupies an area of ca. 2.5 acres (1 ha), fitting with the biblical description of Ai as a small city (smaller than Gibeon: Jos 10:2).²³ But despite its smallness, the bastion at Khirbet el-Maqatir was strongly fortified, with the foundations of the north and west walls being about 13 feet (4 meters) wide.²⁴ According to Joshua 8:11, the Israelites "arrived in front of the city; and they camped on the north side of Ai" (NASB). The principal, and likely the only, gate of the fortress at Khirbet el-Maqatir was in the north or northeast face of the wall. Thus, Khirbet el-Maqatir correlates exactly with the biblical account of Ai.

Evidence of Destruction

At the end of the LB IB period, ca. 1406 BC, a conflagration consumed the city of Ai as recorded in Joshua 8. Though pockets of ash were found throughout the site, the most impressive evidence of the conflagration was the abundance of refired LB IB pottery. Stripling notes, "The pottery's hardness was unlike anything encountered at other sites in Israel or Jordan. A potter fired the vessels once in a kiln and then apparently, they were exposed to extreme heat a second time when the Israelites burned the fortress."²⁵



Glyptic Finds

In 2014, excavation at Khirbet el-Maqatir yielded a decapitated bronze ram's head in a LB I context, within a few meters of the scarabs mentioned below, and at the same elevation.²⁶ Similar decapitated figurines from the Late Bronze Age have also surfaced at Tell el-Qedah (Hazor),

A severed bronze ram's head was discovered at Khirbet el-Maqatir. According to the biblical account, the Israelites were commanded to cut down the idols they encountered during their conquest. Credit: ABR

Continued on page 18

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL AGES & OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY

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BIBLICAL PERIODS	ARCHAEOLOGY PERIOD	DATE, B.C.	SIGNIFICANT EVENTS
PERIOD OF THE PATRIARCHS	Early Bronze I ¹	ca. 3100-2900	Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in 2067 at the end of the EB III period
	Early Bronze II.....	ca. 2900-2600	
	Early Bronze III.....	ca. 2600-2050	
	Early Bronze IV.....	ca. 2050 ² -1900	
Egyptian Sojourn 1876-1446	Middle Bronze I (IIA).....	ca. 1900-1750	Second Intermediate (Hyksos) Period 1668-1560 ⁴ Subjugation of Canaan by Thutmose III in his 22nd year, ca. 1485
	Middle Bronze II (IIB).....	ca. 1750-1650	
	Middle Bronze III (IIC) ³	ca. 1650-1485	
PERIOD OF THE JUDGES 1400-1051	Late Bronze IA ⁵	ca. 1485-1446	Exodus, Spring 1446
	Late Bronze IB.....	ca. 1446-1400	Wilderness Wanderings 1446-1400
	Late Bronze II (IIA).....	ca. 1400-1305	Conquest 1406-1400
	Late Bronze III (IIB) ⁶	ca. 1305-1187	Campaign of Seti I, ca. 1305
			Philistine invasion in the 8th year of Ramses III, ca. 1187
UNITED MONARCHY 1051-932	Iron IA.....	ca. 1187-1140/30	Saul 1051-1009
	Iron IB ⁷	ca. 1140/30-980	David 1009-969
	Iron IIA ⁸	ca. 980-841	Solomon 971- 932
Campaign of Shishak 925 Jehu coup 841			
DIVIDED MONARCHY 932-587	Iron IIB.....	ca. 841-701	Fall of Samaria 723 Campaign of Sennacherib 701
			Iron IIC.....
EXILE	Babylonian Period.....	ca. 587-539	
RETURN	Persian Period.....	ca. 539-332	

1. Dates for the Early and Middle Bronze Ages generally are those of Douglas Petrovich (https://www.academia.edu/4167872/Archaeological_Ages_in_the_Levant).

2. Kris J. Udd, Has Radiocarbon Artificially Raised Bronze Age Dates?

NEASB 58 (2013): 9.

3. The end of the Middle Bronze Age is correlated with the campaign of Thutmose III in ca. 1485 (*Qashish* [2003]: 327).

4. Egyptian dates are those of Douglas Petrovich in *The World's Oldest Alphabet: Hebrew as the Language of the Proto-Consonantal Script* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2016): 234.

5. For general agreement for LB IA, see *Yoqne'am III* (2005): 243, and for general agreement for late MB and LB, see *Tel Beth-Shean II* (2007): 12.

6. The end of Late Bronze Age is correlated with the invasion of the Philistines in ca. 1187.

7. Iron Age IB dates are those of Amihai Mazar in *The Ancient Pottery of Israel and Its Neighbors from the Iron Age through the Hellenistic Period 1*, ed. S. Gitin (2015): 7.

8. Iron Age II dates are based on Amihai Mazar, The Debate over the Chronology of the Iron Age in the Southern Levant: Its History, the Current Situation and a Suggested Resolution, in *The Bible and Radiocarbon Dating—Archaeology, Text and Science*, eds. T.E. Levy and T. Higham (2005): 14.



This tiny Egyptian stone scarab seal was discovered by ABR at their excavation at Khirbet el-Maqtir in Israel. The scarab pictures a falcon-headed sphinx accompanied by two hieroglyphs: the seal dates to the reign of Pharaoh Amenhotep II (15th century BC). Its discovery helped date the destruction of the site to the Late Bronze Age, bolstering the case for Khirbet el-Maqtir being the biblical location of Ai – the second city defeated, captured and burned by the Israelites at the beginning of the Conquest of Canaan as described in Joshua 7 and 8. Credit: ABR

Continued

another site that the Israelites plundered and burned.²⁷

Additionally, two datable scarabs were found about 98 feet (30 meters) east of the gate. The first scarab emerged from inside the fortress, near the gate, ca. 0.79 inches (2 cm) above bedrock in a sealed LB IB locus. Engraved on the base of the scarab is a falcon-headed sphinx with two hieroglyphs, *ankh* (“life”) and *neter* (“god”),²⁸ indicating a date during the 18th Dynasty of Egypt, specifically the reign of Amenhotep II (ca. 1455–1418 BC).²⁹ The second scarab possesses Egyptian hieroglyphs that are surrounded by eight sets of concentric circles and features two crude hieroglyphs in the center.³⁰ This type of scarab is typical of the time of



Scarab from the Hyksos period of the early 15th Dynasty of Egypt. Credit: ABR

the Hyksos period when “foreign rulers” reigned in Egypt in the early 15th Dynasty. The second scarab was also discovered within the fortress and near the gate, but unlike the first scarab, it came from a locus that had been disturbed by looters. Dating to about 1668–1485 BC (MB II–III), the second scarab is consistent with the MB III time frame that ABR established for the founding of the fortress based on ceramic evidence.³¹

Weighing the Evidence

Khirbet el-Maqtir’s location, pottery, and glyptic finds all support its identification as the Ai of Joshua 7–8. Significantly, prior to the influence of modern scholarship, local tradition placed Ai at Khirbet el-Maqtir, a fact often overlooked by previous investigators. As Ai was one of only three cities burned by Joshua, the establishment of Khirbet el-Maqtir as Ai and the results of the site’s excavation may help settle once and for all the problem of the “lost” cities of the Conquest, and consequently help refocus the ongoing and often contentious discussions regarding Near Eastern comparative chronology.

Mount Ebal

After the Israelites burned Ai as described in Joshua 8:1–29, Joshua assembled the Israelites on the slopes of Mount Ebal and read aloud the Law of Moses there (8:30–35). Earlier, Moses had directed, in regard to this event, that half the people were to face Mount Gerizim across the valley, and half were to face the summit of Mount Ebal (Dt 27:11–13). Deuteronomy 11:29 records that Moses instructed Israel to “set the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal.”

When Adam Zertal conducted excavations on Mount Ebal from 1982 to 1989, he happened upon a rectangular structure measuring 28.7–29.5 by 23 feet (8.75–9.00 by 7 meters) and made of uncut stone. He initially determined that the installation was filled with earth, ashes, broken pottery of the Iron Age I period, and animal bones.³² In addition to this Iron Age I rectangular structure (in Stratum 1), Zertal also identified an earlier structure underneath that consisted of “a circle made of medium-sized field stones laid on bedrock and located at the exact geometric center of the [later] structure.”³³ These findings convinced Zertal that “beyond question, our site is a cultic center.”³⁴ Though Zertal, a religious agnostic, had no intention of substantiating the historicity of the Bible, he eventually became an ardent supporter of at least some form of a historic

Conquest event. The older, round altar structure, initially thought by Zertal to be an Iron Age I altar, was later identified as a LB IIA altar by Stripling and the ABR (Associates for Biblical Research) team.³⁵

Lead Tablet

In 2019, Stripling reexamined Zertal's dump piles from Mount Ebal using a unique and thorough method known as wet sifting. The most spectacular find of this project was a small, folded lead tablet dating to 1400-1250 BC that Stripling recognized as a *defixio*, or curse tablet. It measured approximately one square inch (2 × 2 cm), and little was visible on its surface to the naked eye, but when epigraphers employed advanced 3D tomographic scans on the object, the following proto-alphabetic inscription was revealed on the "Inner B" surface of the inside of the tablet:

*You are cursed by the god yhw, cursed.
You will die, cursed—cursed, you will surely die.
Cursed you are by yhw—cursed.*³⁶

Animal Bones and Altar

As Richard Hess³⁷ notes, approximately 96 percent of the bones from Mount Ebal, most of which were found around the altar, came from sheep, goats, cattle, and fallow deer, correlating well with the picture of early Israel's worship suggested by biblical law codes and the narratives of Joshua, Judges, and the books of Samuel. This evidence renders the round altar fully consistent with a kosher, non-agrarian cultic site. Additionally, it should be noted that 100 percent of the stones of the round altar were unworked, in accordance with the requirement of Joshua 8:31.³⁸

Weighing the Evidence

With the discovery of the curse tablet, Stripling and his team have shaken the foundations of the minimalist scholarly community across the world. As Tom Metcalfe puts it,

If the date can be verified, the inscription on the curse tablet would push back the earliest-known date for literacy among the ancient Israelites by several hundred years; until now, the earliest



Caption: Mount Ebal from the Southeast
Credit: Public Domain

*evidence was the Khirbet Qeiyafa Inscription, dating from about the 10 century B.C., according to researchers at Israel's University of Haifa.*³⁹

Without a doubt, the material evidence from Mount Ebal alone makes a powerful case for the historicity of a 15th-century-BC Conquest. Stripling summarizes the simple logic often clouded by the scholarly establishment:

"We have an ancient text saying that the Israelites arrived around 1400 [B.C.], and then we have evidence of them on a mountain where the Bible says that they were, writing a language that the Bible says that they used."... "I think a fair-minded person might be willing to draw the conclusion, inductively, that there were Israelites there."⁴⁰

Hazor

The biblical text contains two accounts concerning Hazor in the times of Joshua and the judges. The first account, found in Joshua 11, depicts the downfall of an alliance of kings in the northern hill country, culminating in the death of Jabin, king of Hazor, and the burning of his city. Later, as Judges 4 describes, Deborah and Barak battle against Sisera, the general of Jabin, king of Hazor. These accounts of Hazor describe two distinct events separated by over 150 years, both involving a regime whose leaders employed the dynastic title of Jabin.⁴¹ Excavations at Hazor have revealed two destruction layers, one in the 15th century BC and one in the 13th, and this bolstered contentions with proponents of the late date (13th century BC) for the Exodus/Conquest. But when all the Hazor evidence is weighed properly,

there is compelling evidence that Joshua and the Israelites were responsible for a destruction in a 15th-century-BC stratum at Hazor (Stratum 2/XV).

Conflagration

Amnon Ben-Tor's excavations in Area M on the northern slope of the tell revealed strong evidence of a LB I (15th-century-BC) conflagration.⁴² Evidence of burn lines, along with the presence of other residual burned areas measuring up to half a meter in some places, conveys the distinctive signs of a significant destruction by fire. Evidence of conflagration in both the upper and lower cities confirms that LB I Hazor indeed was destroyed by a great fire, and that the "cultic centers seemed to have been singled out for especially harsh treatment by the conquerors in the 15th century BC."⁴³

Cultic Desecration

The large number of deliberately mutilated statues found in Stratum XIII (LB IIB / 13th century BC) also aligns with an Israelite-led attack. Ben-Tor notes that this kind of cultic destruction reflects what he calls "religious desecration."⁴⁴ Sharon Zuckerman indicates that these religious desecrations point to "a systematic annihilation campaign, against the very physical symbols of the royal ideology and its loci of ritual legitimation."⁴⁵ Numbers 33:52 and Deuteronomy 12:2-3 record explicit commands to destroy pagan religious installations, idols, and statues. Yigael Yadin and Ben-Tor⁴⁶ and Ben-Tor and Maria Teresa Rubiato⁴⁷ argue that the intentional nature of the desecration points to Israelite action, and even Kenneth Kitchen observes, "Neither the Egyptians, Canaanites nor Sea Peoples destroyed LB Hazor—the early Hebrews remain a feasible option."⁴⁸

Weighing the Evidence

Though evidence suggests the Israelites initially continued a seminomadic, pastoral lifestyle during the early settlement of Canaan, they left a fascinating fingerprint at Hazor with the cultic desecration of the city's idols and statuary as well as with the 15th-century-BC burn layer. In short, the excavations at Hazor provide solid support for the historical reality of the Conquest. Considering that the Hazor of Joshua 11 fell ca. 1400 BC and that around 166 years passed between Joshua's Conquest and the judgeship of Deborah, it follows that the impressive destruction around 1230 BC corresponds well with the time of Deborah and Barak, who likely attacked Hazor in order to kill King Jabin (Jgs 4:24) after having defeated Sisera further south in the Jezreel Valley (Judges 4-5). (The 13th-century-BC destruction may

also correspond with some other event unidentified by the Bible—e.g., an attack by Merneptah.) While some pieces of the Hazor puzzle may be missing and some of the experts examining the archaeological data have misinterpreted the finds, the discoveries at the site beautifully align with a 15th-century-BC Conquest.

Shiloh

Though Shiloh was not one of the cities directly tied to the military conquest of Israel, it remains a very important site that provides relevant data regarding the Conquest's historicity. It was at Shiloh that the Israelites set up the tent of meeting (Jos 18:1) and divided the land among the seven tribes who had not yet received land allotments (18:2-10). Shortly thereafter, Shiloh became a center for the tribes for both deliberating difficult matters (Jos 22:12) and celebrating an annual feast of the Lord (Jgs 21:19). Shiloh became the first permanent dwelling place for the tent of meeting and the ark of the covenant (Jos 18:1) when the Israelites moved from Gilgal.⁴⁹ In the Iron Age I period, Eli and his sons officiated at the tabernacle in Shiloh (Jgs 18:31; 1 Sm 2:12-14), and it was there that God spoke to the prophet Samuel (1 Sm 3).

The results of previous and ongoing excavations at Shiloh have helped to illuminate important chronological issues concerning the process of Israelite settlement after their entry into Israel. While digging at Shiloh in the 1980s, before his views shifted into the realm of minimalism, Israel Finkelstein acknowledged a historical Exodus/Conquest that he asserted took place no earlier than the second half or end of the 12th century BC.⁵⁰ However, Shiloh's current excavations under Stripling's leadership paint a completely different picture, indicating an Israelite arrival at Shiloh at the transition from LB I to LB II. Though volumes could be written on the history of Shiloh and the excavations that date back to the 1920s, our focus will narrow in on the Late Bronze material evidence that speaks to the arrival of the Israelites at the transition from LB IB to LB IIA.

Pottery

From the outset, Late Bronze pottery has been found throughout the excavation site, in the southern, western, northeastern, and northwestern sectors. The Danish found Late Bronze pottery in caves, houses, and walls during their 1926, 1929, and 1932 excavation seasons and in Trench Bb during the 1963 season.⁵¹ From 2019 to 2022, Jordan McClinton and Scott Stripling reanalyzed Finkelstein's published

pottery,⁵² comparing it against published parallels from other sites to see if there was a case for a continued settlement at Shiloh throughout the end of the Late Bronze Age. The reanalysis of the Area D pottery assemblage began with McClinton and Stripling examining all of Finkelstein's Late Bronze pottery plates from his final excavation report and comparing them with well-known Late Bronze sources published by Ruth Amiran⁵³ and Seymour Gitin.⁵⁴ Based on parallels from these sources, McClinton and Stripling determined that 43 out of Finkelstein's 181 original pottery forms represented either LB IIA or LB IIB forms, thus refuting the conclusion that the site of Shiloh was abandoned in the latter part of LB IIA and through LB IIB.⁵⁵

Evidence of Religious Center

After four seasons of excavation at Shiloh, Associates for Biblical Research has revealed significant evidence of the Israelite cultic system that was carried out at Shiloh for over three centuries.⁵⁶ Substantial numbers of sacrificial animal bones and cultic vessels dating to this time have been found by Stripling and the ABR team. Among the bones found at Shiloh site-wide, the number of pig bones averages about four percent in the pagan strata (Strata 8-7) but less than 0.5 percent in the Israelite strata (Strata 6-3). Concerning a Stratum 6 *favissa* (cultic bone deposit), Stripling notes, "Osteological analysis indicates that these animals were slaughtered at a younger age than at parallel sites....Also, bones from the animals' right side (53 percent) outnumbered bones from their left side (47 percent)."⁵⁷ All these findings reflect biblical commands for sacrifices in Leviticus.

Additionally, in 2018, ABR excavated a small ceramic pomegranate in Square AH29.⁵⁸ Pomegranates were a clear motif of the tabernacle and later the temple. After this finding, Stripling identified a second pomegranate from among the objects excavated by the Danish. Both belong to Stratum V (Iron Age I).⁵⁹ These sacred objects may have

hung from the hem of a priest's robe or served as decoration for cult stands.⁶⁰ Excavations in the Levitical city of Yokneam yielded similar ceramic pomegranates, indicating a connection to the cultic activity of the Israelites.⁶¹

Furthermore, in 2019, Area H1 excavations produced two stones that likely served as horns on a sacrificial altar. The first horn (Object 1615) was found in a wall of an Early Roman-period structure, where it had been in secondary usage, and the second horn (Object 1185), also seemingly reused by Early Roman builders, lay only two meters to the south, in Square AH30. As the altar was a foundational component of the tabernacle's sacrificial system, the presence of altar horns at Shiloh further establishes verisimilitude for the biblical account.⁶²

Weighing the Evidence

The ceramic analysis points to Shiloh's establishment as a cultic center beginning in the Late Bronze Age, ca. 1400 BC. The animal bone deposits, pomegranates, and altar horns all provide clear evidence that there was an Israelite cultic system active and working in Shiloh exactly as reported in the Bible.

Conclusion

When one carefully surveys the evidence for the historicity of the Exodus and Conquest, that evidence should dispel any notion that the biblical account of the Conquest belongs in the realm of myth or legend. Archaeology cannot prove that the Conquest happened, but it certainly has not proven that it did not happen, and when you look at the evidence gleaned from the biblical text and from analysis of the archaeological data, I think it takes more faith to be a skeptic than to read the book of Joshua as a reliable historical document. As of right now, the intersections between the Bible and archaeology lend credibility to the historical narrative recorded by the biblical authors.



The pomegranate found during the 2018 ABR Shiloh excavation. Credit: ABR